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Task force to work on economic development in southwest region

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LOS ANGELES - While the U.S. Senate debates how to handle the 12 million illegal immigrants in the country, Southern California leaders are working with their Mexican counterparts to strengthen the region's economy.

Economic growth throughout what's known as the Southwest Mega Region - from Kern County to the northern Mexican state of Baja California, east to Las Vegas, Phoenix and Tucson, Ariz. - would pay dividends on both sides of the border, the head of the Southern California Association of Governments, SCAG, said Thursday.

"We're talking about reestablishing the acceleration of economic development in Mexico," said SCAG Executive Director Mark Pisano. "If there's ever a strategy to deal with immigration, it's creating more employment opportunities in Mexico."

SCAG members of the Southwest Compact Task Force met Thursday to discuss their effort and to announce a bi-national conference April 26 in Mexicali, Mexico.

The task force seeks to plan for infrastructure and development for the overall region, which forms the world's 10th largest economy. Mexico is the biggest recipient of California exports, according to SCAG, and imports from Mexico have more than doubled over the past decade to \$20 billion.

The global economy has shifted into competing mega regions, Pisano said, with Asian and European governments working cooperatively for their own competitive advantage.

In the United States, nine such mega regions account for 70% of the country's growth in population and economy and 80% of the nation's wealth, he said.

"If we can identify common needs for infrastructure improvements and economic development opportunities," said Imperial County Supervisor Victor Carillo, "we can really transform the collective future of our respective areas and position us as a true economic powerhouse in the global marketplace."

Mexicali Mayor Samuel Ramos Flores said his city of 1.2 million people just south of the U.S. border is growing economically and in population. It is developing a "Silicon Border" of high-tech companies, including employment in aerospace and semiconductors.

"We have been carrying on meetings with officials from both sides of the border because we are convinced that we have to work together," Ramos Flores said through a translator. "We have seen it's very beneficial to both sides ... to promote it as a whole region."

A committee combining 12 governmental offices is designed to ease the process of establishing a business in the city, with offices in Mexicali and in Los Angeles and San Francisco, Ramos Flores said.

Pisano and Ramos Flores noted a new cargo airport in Ensenada is planned to carry more than a million containers a year, with a rail line taking the goods east to Mexicali and elsewhere. That will ease the congestion at the Long Beach port and complement port operations in the overall Southwest region, Pisano said.

"Our hope is that there is continued employment growth in Mexico so that people from Mexico and South America can find economic opportunities, and marry those economic advantages with our region and therefore compete globally," Pisano said.

"It's directly related (to the current immigration debate) and taking advantage of the factors of production in Mexico, so Southern California and (the Baja region) can compete with Asia."